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The Impact of the Internet on Library Education

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Clearly, the Internet has brought about changes in libraries comparable to those brought about by invention of the printing press. As Kirk Doran (1996) stated, "A product of immense creativity, the Internet that we created is in turn changing us." As in any time of great change, many opportunities and challenges are present.

Obviously, this has had ramifications for the education of library professionals. In 1994, Wittig and Wolfram conducted a survey of networking education in North American library schools. One element they explored was the impact of electronic networks on library education. They found that "although there is general agreement that the impact of these developments on library and information science education will be profound, there is little consensus on the specifics of that impact." Two years later, some general trends seem to be emerging. The Internet has been the impetus for many changes in curriculum as schools have attempted to integrate this technology into their programs. In addition, innovative approaches that use the Internet for conducting class are being tried. Perhaps most importantly, we are beginning to see the way library students have changed in response to a networked world. As a student currently pursuing a Master's in Library and Information Science through the Oregon program of Emporia State University, I hope to give some personal insights into this issue.

That librarians must take the lead in development and utilization of the Internet is well documented. However, integrating the Internet into the library school curriculum has not been without difficulties. Wittig and Wolfram (1994) found that "respondents overwhelmingly agreed on the importance of integrating networking concepts into the LIS curriculum. However, there was less agreement about the most appropriate locations in the curriculum for these topics." A review of current degree programs in various schools of library and information science show that this issue has still not been resolved. Whether Internet skills should be included in each course or taught separately is a difficult dilemma for several reasons.

The levels of experience students bring into a program obviously has a bearing on how the Internet is integrated into a curriculum. This raises the difficult question of "what level of computer literacy or information literacy should be required, if any, of students when they enter a program?" (Froehlich, 1994). I experienced this first hand in my cohort. Some of us had never even used the Internet, while others were already writing HTML. We generally had to acquire the necessary skills on our own, and this led to a certain amount of anxiety. This may change as the Internet becomes more ubiquitous. However, this is an issue that must be dealt with.

Related to this is the skill level of the faculty. Some are obviously more adept at using and teaching the Internet. As Froehlich (1994) aptly noted, "technological courses have to be structured around each faculty person's strengths and weaknesses." Obviously, the question of integrating the Internet into the curriculum is a complex issue. As the Internet continues to change and evolve, so too must library education.

The area where I have personally experienced the greatest impact of the Internet is on how courses are being conducted. Many library schools are now offering some form of distance education. This is necessary because "today's graduate students rarely have the luxury of spending one to two years in residence at a traditional campus-based program" (Godden and Moothart, 1995).

One of the complaints about distance education in the past was that students did not have regular interaction with peers and professors. The Internet, however, has revolutionized distance education by allowing this interaction. As Steve Harries (1995) noted, "The flexibility of the networked environment, which is emerging as a principal aspect of third generation distance learning, does provide an infrastructure within which collaborative learning can take place via shared group experience and peer group insights—the form of person-to-person networking which forms the basis of much professional development." I can attest to the effectiveness of the e-mail and listservs in this respect. The Emporia program utilizes a weekend intensive format where we earn one credit by spending 15 hours in the classroom. Between classes, we stay in contact through a very active listserv. Assignments are discussed, and arrangements are made for sharing resources. E-mail has also allowed for small group projects. I have even had classmates critique my papers by sending files back and forth using FTP. In addition, faculty members are accessible through e-mail. All of this has added a very important dimension to the program. Not only has this enhanced the quality of the educational experience we have received, but it has also enabled us to use the technology on a daily basis.

Emporia State is also experimenting with courses that take place entirely over the Internet. A course on information design was recently offered that used a Web site, a listserv and e-mail. This was a unique opportunity to explore both the strengths and weaknesses of this medium.

Opportunities are also being explored to use the Internet in conjunction with other technologies. For example, the University of Michigan offered two innovative courses in 1995 that employed "two-way interactive audio and video conferencing in the classroom and at the desktop along with Internet Web pages and conferencing for students at the University of Illinois and at UC-Berkeley"(CRISTALED, 1996). This will hopefully be the start of many more cooperative ventures between library schools.

All of this of course implies that students have access to the Internet. In our enthusiasm for this new medium, it is often easy to forget that this is not always the case. Eloise Greene, a participant in a distance program through Syracuse University, commented on a recent CRISTAL-ED listserv discussion: "One of the biggest challenges for my cohort was interconnective service. Most seem unable to connect to the Web, but all have electronic mail and some way of uploading/downloading files. For some it has been an unanticipated financial burden of $200 to $300 a month for the home connectivity charges" (Greene, 1995). Even in Oregon, where most areas have Internet service, access can be a problem. Several people in our program simply do not have the resources to purchase a home computer. They are therefore restricted to using Internet connections at libraries, which is not always convenient.

The Internet has not only changed the tangibles of course content and delivery, it also has helped lead to some fundamental changes in the way students approach their educational experience. We are no longer site-bound in our interactions. Students from different institutions can now connect with each other through listservs such as LIS-L (listserv@vmd.cso.uiuc.edu), a global discussion list of issues relating to library and information science students. Peer reviewed e-journals, such as the *Katharine Sharp Review,* **edfu.lis.uiuc.edu/review**, publish articles by library students. In addition, many schools post their syllabi on their Web pages. This allows students to gain a perspective on what is being taught in other schools. At times, it is even possible to read class lectures. All of these contribute to making library students better consumers of information.

Clearly, the Internet has made a profound impact on library education. Being a student while these rapid developments take place will no doubt help prepare us as we enter into the changing profession of library and information science. The students who are in library school now can be instrumental in the shaping of this new technology. I and many others like me find that to be a very exciting prospect. Q

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Skeptic

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impact on the lives of library users. I am just not sure I like what the cards foretell about its eventual impact on my professional life, and I don't think the crystal ball is clear about the negative consequences for all librarians concerned. Q

Trapped

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information access. Do we, for instance, want our OPAC terminals used by our customers to send and read their e-mail? The good news is that the problem won't be with us for long. By next Web year, we'll have a different challenge. Q

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